

JANUARY 6, 1976

THORNTON WILDER: AN APPRECIATION

ANNCR: THE VOICE OF AMERICA NOW BRINGS YOU ANOTHER IN ITS WEEKLY SERIES FROM THE BOOKSHELF...A SERIES IN WHICH WE REGULARLY REVIEW SOME OF THE BOOKS AMERICANS ARE CURRENTLY READING. TODAY, WE DEPART FROM OUR REGULAR PATTERN FOR AN APPRECIATION OF THORNTON WILDER, THE WORLD-FAMOUS AMERICAN WRITER WHO DIED IN DECEMBER AT THE AGE OF SEVENTY-EIGHT. ROGER LYONS, VOA'S BOOK EDITOR AND LONG A DEVOTEE OF MR. WILDER, HAS THESE COMMENTS:

EDITOR: AMERICA'S MOST HONORED PLAYWRIGHT AND AUTHOR, THORNTON WILDER, WROTE ABOUT AND LOVED AND, ABOVE ALL, REPRESENTED A VERY POSITIVE SIDE OF THE AMERICAN NATIONAL CHARACTER. EVEN TODAY, HE IS ADMIRER AND ENJOYED BY PERHAPS THE LARGEST INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCE OF ANY AMERICAN AUTHOR. THE WORKS WHICH MADE HIM FAMOUS WERE HIS SECOND NOVEL, THE BRIDGE OF SAN LUIS REY, HIS EPIC COMEDY THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH AND THE EVER-POPULAR OUR TOWN WHICH HAS PLAYED TO AUDIENCES FROM JAPAN TO THE SOVIET UNION. MORE RECENTLY, THE MUSICAL HELLO DOLLY, AND ADAPTATION OF WILDER'S PLAY THE MATCHMAKER, HAS ENTERTAINED MILLIONS YEAR AFTER YEAR.

ALL OF THORNTON WILDER'S WORKS ARE INFUSED WITH THE IDEA THAT A UNIVERSAL AND MYSTERIOUS SIGNIFICANCE ATTACHES TO THE TYPICAL IN HUMAN EXPERIENCE -- GOOD

EDITOR: AND EVIL, LOVE AND HATE, BIRTH AND DEATH -- AND THAT
(CONT) THIS IS TRUE WHETHER IT HAPPENS IN THE LIVES OF THE
MOST POWERFUL OR THE MOST ORDINARY OF MORTALS.

IN HIS VERY FIRST NOVEL THE CABALA, PUBLISHED JUST
FIFTY YEARS AGO, THIS COMES OUT CLEARLY. THIS EARLY
WORK IS ABOUT THE HIDDEN INFLUENCE OF A SECRET BUT
DOOMED COTERIE LIVING IN ROME, KNOWN AS THE CABALA.
IN THE END IT TURNS OUT THAT EACH OF THESE TALENTED
ECCENTRICS IS PERHAPS AN INCARNATION OF ONE OF THE
THE OLYMPIAN GREEK GODS OR GODDESSES, PUTTING IN A
LAST APPEARANCE BEFORE THEIR WANING POWER DESERTS
THEM ALTOGETHER.

THE CABALA CONTAINS SOME OF
WILDER'S MOST EXQUISITE PROSE. ITS SUBTLE VIGNETTES
GIVE A HINT OF THE BIZARRE IMAGINATION THAT WAS TO
PRODUCE THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH. PROBABLY, THE READING
PUBLIC OF THAT TIME COULD NOT ASSIMILATE THE STRANGE
QUALITY OF THE WORK AND THIS MAY ACCOUNT FOR THE
FACT THAT THE CABALA WAS ONLY A CRITICAL SUCCESS.

BUT WITH THE BRIDGE OF SAN LUIS REY, WHICH APPEARED
THE FOLLOWING YEAR, WILDER WON INSTANT FAME AND THE
FIRST OF THREE PULITZER PRIZES. THE BOOK SOLD 300,000
COPIES THE FIRST YEAR, AN ASTRONOMICAL FIGURE FOR
THE TIME. IT HAS SINCE BECOME A CLASSIC. "ON FRIDAY
NOON, JULY TWENTIETH, 1714," RUNS THE OPENING
SENTENCE, "THE FINEST BRIDGE IN ALL PERU BROKE AND
PRECIPITATED FIVE TRAVELERS INTO THE GULF BELOW."
BROTHER JUNIPER DECIDES TO MAKE IT HIS LIFE TASK TO FIND

EDITOR: OUT WHY THIS HAPPENED TO JUST THESE FIVE INDIVIDUALS AT
(CONT) THAT PARTICULAR MOMENT.

AND THIS IS THE DEVICE WHICH

WILDER USES TO DEVELOP ANOTHER SET OF FASCINATING
AND DIVERSE CHARACTERS AND THE INTRICACIES OF THEIR
LIVES. AS IN THE CABALA, WILDER'S BROODING ON
RELIGIOUS QUESTIONS GIVES THE BOOK ITS TONE. WAS
THE SIMULTANEOUS DEATH OF JUST THESE FIVE PERSONS

AN ACCIDENT OR INTENTIONAL? THE READER'S CURIOSITY

IS PIQUED BUT HE IS GIVEN NO ANSWER. "SOME SAY,"
MUSES THE NARRATOR, "THAT WE SHALL NEVER KNOW AND THAT
TO THE GODS WE ARE LIKE FLIES THAT THE BOYS KILL ON A
SUMMER DAY, AND SOME SAY, ON THE CONTRARY, THAT THE
VERY SPARROWS DO NOT LOSE A FEATHER THAT HAS NOT BEEN
BRUSHED AWAY BY THE FINGER OF GOD."

DESPITE THE DARK ASPECTS OF HUMAN NATURE, WILDER HAS AN
IRREPRESSIBLE AFFECTION FOR MANKIND. THIS COMES OUT
MOST PROMINENTLY IN WILDER'S EVER-POPULAR PLAY OUR
TOWN, WHICH APPEARED MORE THAN A DECADE AFTER THE BRIDGE
OF SAN LUIS REY AND HAS SINCE BEEN SEEN ON STAGE AND
SCREEN ALL OVER THE WORLD. OUR TOWN PENETRATES TO THE
HEART OF EVENTS IN THE SMALL NEW ENGLAND TOWN OF GROVERS
CORNER.

THE USE OF A BARE, UNDISGUISED STAGE WITH
LITTLE OR NO SCENERY AND A RUNNING PHILOSOPHICAL
COMMENTARY BY THE STAGE MANAGER OUTSIDE THE ACTION WERE
INNOVATIONS WHICH HAVE GREATLY INFLUENCED THE THEATER.

DESPITE ACCUSATIONS OF SENTIMENTALITY, THIS PLAY
CONTINUES TO GO THROUGH PERIODIC REVIVALS.

EDITOR: BUT, IN THIS REVIEWER'S OPINION, WILDER'S MASTERPIECE,
(CONT) PRODUCED DURING THE LOWEST POINT OF THE SECOND WORLD
WAR, WAS THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH. OUR TOWN IS THE LIFE OF
A FAMILY SEEN FROM A TELESCOPE FIVE MILES AWAY," MR.
WILDER ONCE EXPLAINED. THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH IS
THE DESTINY OF THE WHOLE HUMAN GROUP SEEN FROM A
TELESCOPE 11,000 MILES AWAY." THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH
IS A DARK COMEDY, A PARABLE OF MAN'S HISTORY IN WHICH THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY, THE ICE AGE AND FREEZING DINOSAURS
ALL DESCEND AT THE SAME TIME ON THE PROTOTYPE OF THE
HUMAN FAMILY. AGAIN AND AGAIN THE ETERNAL TEMPTRESS
LURES THE ERRING HUSBAND AWAY FROM HIS WIFE. BUT THE
HUSBAND RETURNS IN THE END. CAIN, THE SON OF THIS
COUPLE, COMMITS HIS MURDEROUS CRIME NOT ONCE BUT IN
EVERY AGE. MAN IS CONSTANTLY THREATENED WITH EXTINCTION,
BUT ALWAYS MANAGES TO COME THROUGH BY THE SKIN OF HIS
TEETH TO MAKE A NEW BEGINNING. AND SO IT WILL ALWAYS
BE, WILDER IMPLIES, UNTIL THE END OF TIME.

ONE OF THE LAST SCENES OF THIS PLAY EXPRESSES
BEAUTIFULLY WILDER'S MYSTICAL FAITH THAT LIFE HAS
MEANING. THE INCIDENT OCCURS WHEN THE STAGE MANAGER
INTERRUPTS THE ACTION TO EXPLAIN TO THE AUDIENCE THAT
SOME OF THE ACTORS HAVE BEEN TAKEN ILL AND IF THE PLAY
IS TO CONTINUE, THEIR PARTS WILL HAVE TO BE TAKEN OVER
BY THE STAGE HANDS, THE USHERS AND OTHER THEATER EMPLOYEES.
THE BEHIND-THE-SCENES PEOPLE ARE EAGER TO ASSUME THE
PARTS WHICH THEY ALL KNOW BECAUSE THEY HAVE BEEN WATCHING

EDITOR: THE REHEARSALS AND PERFORMANCES DAY AFTER DAY. EACH IS
(CONT) ASSIGNED TO ACT THE PART OF SOME GREAT SAGE WHO IS
REPRESENTED AS ONE OF THE HOURS OF THE NIGHT. NINE
O'CLOCK IS SPIROZA; TEN O'CLOCK PLATO; ELEVEN O'CLOCK
ARISTOTLE, AND MIDNIGHT THE BIBLE. THE LIGHTS ARE LOWERED
AND EACH OF THE HOURS SLOWLY PASSES OVER A BRIDGE,
RECITING ONE OF THE GREAT IDEAS OF MANKIND'S WISE
MEN. THE SCENE CONVEYS TO THE AUDIENCE THE NOTION
THAT THE VERY ATMOSPHERE AROUND US IS PREGNANT WITH
THE GREATNESS OF MANKIND'S PAST AND THAT THIS HERITAGE
INFLUENCES ALL OF OUR LIVES WHETHER WE KNOW IT OR NOT.
IT ALSO DEMONSTRATES ONE OF WILDER'S DOMINANT TRAITS,
A PROFOUNDLY DEMOCRATIC SPIRIT. FOR IN HIS WORKS
HE EXPRESSES OVER AND OVER AGAIN, IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER,
THE IDEA THAT EVERYONE, FROM THE MOST FAMOUS TO
THE LOWLIEST, MAKES HIS IMPRINT IN CARRYING OUT THE
DIVINE PLAN AND THAT MAN'S GENIUS LIVES ON IN ALL OF
US, BINDING THE PAST TO THE FUTURE. AND THIS HAPPENS
EVEN IF PARTICULAR INDIVIDUALS ARE QUITE UNAWARE OF IT.

ANNCR: YOU HAVE BEEN LISTENING TO AN APPRECIATION OF THE LATE
THORNTON WILDER WHO DIED LAST MONTH (DECEMBER 7, 1975).
JOIN US AGAIN NEXT _____ (AT THIS TIME) FOR ANOTHER
IN THIS SERIES OF PROGRAMS ... FROM THE BOOKSHELF.

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